

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-A

WASHINGTON TIMES
25 March 1985

Pakistan-U.S.S.R. showdown

By Marin Strmecki
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

PESHAWAR, Pakistan — Moscow's new campaign of intimidation against Pakistan has produced its first tangible success, forcing Afghan resistance forces to abandon a string of military posts along the Afghan-Pakistani border overrun just 10 days ago.

The Afghans yielded, and the Soviet Union re-established its control over a 15-kilometer stretch of the strategic Tour Kham Highway running from the Khyber Pass toward Kabul after threatening to bomb populated border areas in Pakistan.

In addition, an Afghan resistance group said yesterday that two of its leading guerrilla commanders were killed by mines scattered by Soviet

troops during the sweep through rebel bases near the Pakistani border.

At the same time, according to analysts in Washington, a 5,000-member Afghan army force assisted by Soviet special forces is chewing up permanent Afghan resistance bases stretching from the highway to the Khyber Pass.

"They're obviously going for the kill," an analyst said.

The Soviet campaign of intimidation against Pakistan was signaled less than two weeks ago, when Pakistani President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq traveled to Moscow to attend the funeral of the late Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko.

According to a report from the Soviet news agency Tass, Mikhail Gorbachev, the new Soviet leader, castigated President Zia for supporting "aggression" against Afghanistan from Pakistani soil, and warned that Soviet-Pakistani ties could be affected in a "most negative" way.

President Zia referred to that stern warning from Mr. Gorbachev when he addressed the new Parliament last week and pledged anew his support for the Afghan resistance.

Moreover, in Soviet academic circles, a major theme recently is the artificiality of Pakistan's borders,

characterized as a "colonial creation." The implication of such arguments is that in any overall settlement of Central Asia, there may be no place for Pakistan as a state.

There has been speculation recently that the Soviet Union, under an aggressive new leader, may be using threats against a U.S. ally in an attempt to encourage the United States to reduce its pressure on Nicaragua.

An analogous maneuver was attempted during the Cuban missile crisis, when Moscow demanded that Washington pull its nuclear missiles out of Turkey, a Soviet neighbor, in exchange for the removal of newly placed missiles in Cuba.

According to sources in the Peshawar-based Afghan political parties, the Soviet Union claimed that Pakistan was assisting the resistance forces holding the highway and that bombardment on the Pakistani side of the border would be undertaken if the roadside posts were not evacuated.

In the past year, Afghan air force jets and helicopters have flown over 70 sorties across the border, killing more than 250 people.

Sources said that Pakistani authorities informed leaders of the Afghan resistance of the Soviet demand and insisted that their forces comply immediately. At the same time, border troops also began stopping supply trucks traveling toward the area and arresting resistance commanders who were returning to the front after consulting with military leaders in Peshawar.

As a result of ammunition shortages and in accordance with the orders of their parties' military committees, the resistance fighters withdrew from their positions on the highway within 48 hours.

The next day a major Soviet-Afghan government force, which witnesses said included some 200 tanks, reoccupied the area and assaulted resistance positions in nearby mountains for two days.

The crisis was precipitated 10 days ago, when resistance commanders in the field decided to mount a systematic attack on government posts along the highway in retaliation for recent heavy artillery bombardment.

Sources said that offensive, launched without consulting leaders in Peshawar, violated an informal

agreement between Islamabad and resistance organizations not to attack Kabul government posts near the border to avoid giving the Soviet Union a pretext to strike directly against Pakistan.

Sayed Mohammed, a commander from the area whose units are affiliated with the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA), said local military leaders chose unanimously to ignore the agreement with Pakistan.

"We were being bombed by artillery fire from those posts, and so it was out of the duty of self-defense that we retaliated. Can the Pakistani authorities secure our lives?" he said.

After two days of sporadic but heavy fighting, resistance units had overrun 10 government posts —

including positions on strategic Sham Shat Mountain that control the Afghan end of the Khyber Pass.

Sayed Mohammed said 300 resistance troops were involved in the attacks. He said that more than 100 Afghan government troops were killed and that another 150 were captured. He also reported that casualties to the resistance forces included only five killed and about 20 wounded.

Lal Mohammed, another NIFA commander who returned from the area yesterday, said intelligence reports were received indicating that a large armored column was preparing to retake the area. As a result, resistance forces planted dozens of mines along the road.

Gus Constantine contributed to this report from Washington.

Marin Strmecki has been in Pakistan for two months and has spent the last three weeks on the Afghan-Pakistani border. Earlier, he worked for three years as a research assistant for former President Richard M. Nixon on his books.